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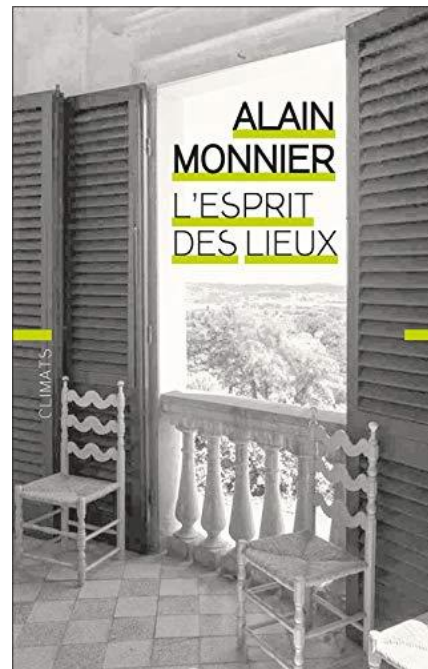
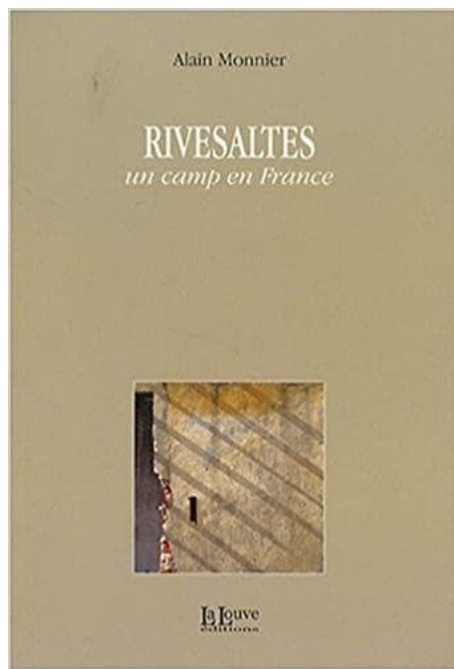
Psychogeography of a camp: Risevaltes

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What can we learn from other literary forms as we research, teach, and write history? I often think about this question in my work on the history of refugees and of refugee camps. In my teaching I often come back to poetry as a form that can communicate some aspects of refugees' experiences more precisely and succinctly than the expository prose of a history book: the fretful repetitions of Auden's "Refugee Blues" echo the repeated displacements and rejections; Elaine Feinstein's "The Refugee" evokes the immanence in exile of all that was lost, as well as its inexpressibility. Novels can help us think about whose stories we are telling, and how. Literary prose can communicate subjective experiences, emotional or psychological states that historical writing would usually be uncomfortable with, especially—though not only—when it is rooted in the author's personal or family history. "The truth is that the novelist's truth makes a truer story," Lore Segal wrote recently, reflecting on the divergence between the narrative of her life as a Kindertransport refugee that she had recounted as her first novel in the 1960s and the historical facts that she had later been able to recover. In the novel, the ten-year-old Lore disembarks at Harwich alone: "I walked down the plank [and] stood in land that I presumed to be England." But in 2005 a film-maker found footage of Segal, clearly identifiable by the number 152 around her neck, walking *up* a sloping plank with a group of other children. Both are true: the footage captures the historical fact of the children disembarking, but the novel renders the

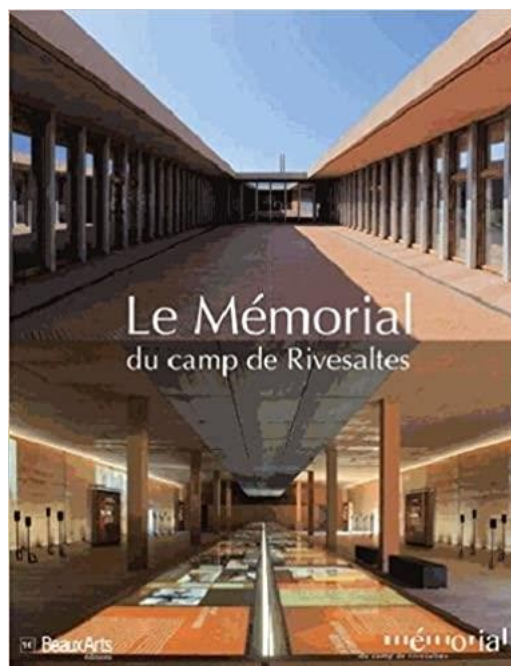
individual experience of a child separated from home and family, arriving in a wholly unfamiliar land—all alone, even if there were other children all around her.



I picked up a copy of Alain Monnier’s short book about the camp at Rivesaltes in southwestern France on a visit there a few years ago. Set up in 1938 as a military transit camp, between 1939 and the 2000s this camp held successive populations of mobile people. Spanish Republican refugees were sent to Rivesaltes after passing through barbed wire enclosures on the beaches not far away, and once the second world war began other ‘undesirable aliens’ were interned there too. Conditions in the camp, already bad, deteriorated further after the fall of France: internees suffered from poor accommodation, meagre rations, and mistreatment. The young Swiss nurse Friedel Bohny-Reiter worked in the camp for the Secours suisse aux enfants. When she cycled into nearby Perpignan in the intense cold of January 1942 for her first break in six weeks, she found it strange to see people in hats and coats, with real leather shoes on their feet. “Don’t think,” she wrote in her diary a few days later, “carry on, help where it’s needed, believe in the peace.” [1]

Rivesaltes housed around 21,000 people of many nationalities in its two years of operation

as an internment camp under Vichy. 215 internees died there, 51 of them infants. But the most notorious episode in the camp's history came when Jews rounded up from across the 'free' zone were held there prior to their deportation and murder. After the Liberation, Rivesaltes held Axis prisoners-of-war and suspected collaborators awaiting trial; later it accommodated migrant workers, *harkis* and their families expatriated from Algeria, and other colonial troops. From 1986 to 2007 there was an immigration detention centre on the site. This only closed—or rather, moved—after the regional government decided to build a memorial museum at Rivesaltes. The museum opened in 2015, though Monnier's book was written before it was built.



Monnier is a novelist, not an historian, and his book isn't a history but a kind of psychogeography (though he doesn't use that term himself): an account of a visit to the site when it was little more than an acreage of ruined concrete huts, and an imaginative effort to summon up its history, one part of its history in particular. I read the book at the time and found it troubling, though not for the reasons the author intends. Recently I reread it

with this question more explicitly in mind. What can we learn, as historians writing about camps, from this literary approach?



Psychogeography has been described as the art of getting creatively lost. At its best it combines a novelistic sensibility with historical knowledge to conjure the spirit of a place as the author moves through it. (*L'Esprit des lieux* is the title of Monnier's last book, a 2019 collection of essays whose first chapter draws on his book about Rivesaltes.) It's an allusive literary form that can provide deep insight into the history of a place without being constrained by the norms of historical writing, such as a perceived need to document chains of causation, or provide a chronological account that moves in one direction across a defined period. It allows more scope for writers to express their subjective response (or perhaps just admit it more honestly), and it stresses the importance of the imagination in animating our historical understanding of a place. It is also prone to self-indulgence, pretentiousness, and—in the hands of male practitioners—an unthinking centering of the male gaze. But we could say the same of much history writing.

As a literary writer Monnier is good on the dulling effect of official language, which concealed sites of internment and deportation behind “snoring titles” like “national assembly centre for Israelites.” (11) He brings a novelist’s eye to the landscape surrounding the site, from the “imposing blue silhouette” of Le Canigou on the horizon to the “dirt track lined with forgotten vine stocks” that leads to the gate: two concrete pillars with rusted hinges and “thick, rusty barbed wire that lies on the ground and soon disappears in a thicket of scrub” (14). Descriptions like these capture the atmosphere of the site as well as its exposed location and unforgiving weather. At times, his eye for detail leads Monnier to useful insights and good questions, as when he spots traces of coloured paint inside spartan accommodation blocks, or the “two charming low walls trimmed with red bricks” on either side of the gate that soon give way to a high wall topped with barbed wire: “Who wanted this detail?” he asks, “Why? Why pretend?” Inside the accommodation huts, he notes holes in the walls to allow the passage of stovepipes for stoves that were never installed: “Always this need to advertise good intentions, and this baleful laziness that stops them from being met.” (22)

The closing paragraphs of the book move from this kind of description into a poetic vision. As dusk deepens and a pale moon rises, Monnier leans against a post and looks out over the flat, scrubby landscape, imagining it as “a vast endless cemetery where every tuft of thyme, every stalk of lavender might be the tomb of a dead soul returned here, to this place of suffering and betrayal.” (89) The dead souls are those of the Jews who were assembled at Rivesaltes for transportation to Drancy, near Paris, and then east to be murdered by the Nazis. Monnier acknowledges the many different groups were interned at Rivesaltes over the decades, but it’s the experience of the Jews that fascinates him. Born barely 60km away

in Narbonne in 1955, Monnier grew up surrounded by people who had lived through Vichy, but he never heard the name Rivesaltes mentioned at home or in school. He only encountered the camp in 1995, when he saw it from the air on a flight from Paris to Perpignan, and connected the sight—“perfect alignments of long and straight rectangular houses, half destroyed, over hectares and hectares” (8)—with a newspaper article about the Spanish refugees. His book is an effort to understand this place that was so little known, yet so close to home.



There's a danger in Monnier's focus on one group among Rivesaltes' residents. By the 1990s, memory associations connected to three groups in particular had started to commemorate their experiences at the camp: Spanish Republicans, Jews, and, after 1962, Algerian Muslims who had fought on the French side in the war of independence (known as *harkis*). Unusually, these different associations recognized that the experiences of "their" group constituted one part of a larger history, and pushed for that shared history to be commemorated. The site's history, they saw, shows how the anxiety, fear, and hostility of French governments towards many different mobile populations (not just refugees and

“enemy aliens”) were manifested spatially, in an installation intended to confine and contain them. Some were destined to be integrated, more or less grudgingly: of the *harkis* who arrived in 1962, some stayed there into the 1970s. Some were held apart: colonial troops or migrant workers in the 1950s. And some were destined for expulsion: Jewish internees, Axis prisoners-of-war, or immigration detainees. But all were immobilized and contained at Rivesaltes. The memorial museum is impressively consistent in recognizing and communicating this central point about the continuity of these illiberal practices at the site.



It's a point that Monnier misses. "It's the fate of wars, of battles, to have winners and losers," he writes, and the other residents of Rivesaltes are simply the latter: "refugees, in the immense cohort of refugees who since antiquity, from Nineveh to Carthage, Montségur to Tenochtitlan, have swelled the ranks of a ragged and despairing humanity." (10) If the Republic had won the Spanish civil war, different refugees would have fled. As for the *harkis*, "losers of another conflict," they were merely "fleeing their homeland to escape the vengeful cruelty of the victors." (12) Unfortunate such people may be, but for Monnier their suffering is a routine part of the misery of the world. And the non-forcibly displaced

populations housed at Rivesaltes are barely mentioned. No: the group he is interested are the “people of the Shoah.” The other refugees at Rivesaltes were, for Monnier, “part of the History of the world” in all its shabbiness. But the Jews interned there during the Shoah were “no longer, at that precise moment, actors of History,” but “flotsam tossed about at the whim of men’s madness.” (13) This exceptional status is why Monnier focuses exclusively on their experiences.

Historians, too, zero in on specific periods, specific groups. But at its best psychogeography listens to many different voices of the past, from many different times, that remain audible in the present. Doing this in the camp setting of Rivesaltes would have given Monnier, as it can give historians, a better understanding of what Jews experienced there, because it isn’t true that refugees in the twentieth century simply shared an unfortunate fate with all those others displaced since antiquity.



The word 'refugee' came into English in the seventeenth century with the French Protestants who fled renewed persecution after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They were able to take refuge in England and settle there without the state trying to stop them, as they did too in Antwerp and Berlin. Only with the rise of modern nation-states did rulers start intervening directly in the lives of the people they ruled over, legitimizing themselves with the claim to *represent* those people that rendered problematic the presence of newly-arrived strangers. Modern state territorialization, with the surveillance of frontiers and the state monopoly on the legitimate "means of movement," took hold at the same time—and was well developed by the start of the twentieth century, although the process was decisively accelerated by World War I.[2] Millions of people displaced during that conflict and the "violent peacetime" that followed, found themselves excluded from the new nation-states that emerged on the ruins of dynastic empires in Europe and the Middle East, and unable to be (re)settled anywhere: this is why the "refugee problem" began to be conceived in international politics at this time. The widespread adoption of encampment as a spatial means of managing displaced populations and keeping them separate from states' "own" people dates to the turn of the 1920s.

People displaced after the first world war, in other words, were *not* like earlier refugees. They were at risk of becoming stateless, a quality that took on a terrible new meaning as "statehood" became an intense, institutionally structured new norm. It became a weapon states could use against their own people: Bolshevik Russia denationalizing civil war refugees; Fascist Italy selectively denationalizing individual political opponents; democratic Poland retaining the right to denationalize citizens who failed to complete their national service—in practice mostly Jews who had ended up with Polish citizenship after the war but

were unwanted by the new state, and often not resident in it. Refugees were also at risk of being encamped, indeed interned. One of the harshest policies of encampment was that imposed by a fearful and divided French Republic on the Spanish Republican refugees who fled over the Pyrenees in early 1939 to the region around Rivesaltes. This policy quickly gave way to a generalized internment of ‘enemy aliens’ as the second world war began. In the midst of these events, Hannah Arendt memorably described the way that “contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.”[3]



These were the lessons that the Third Reich had learned as it progressively stripped its Jewish citizens of their nationality, pushed them out into the world, and developed practices of internment that would be scaled up to underpin genocide. And this is why it's misguided to consider the history of the Jews caught up in it as something entirely singular, distinct from that of the other people displaced in Europe's 1920s and 30s. A site like Rivesaltes concretely connects their histories, as a more expansive psychogeography could have

revealed. By dismissing other people who were encamped, interned, or accommodated there, Monnier misses something important about the group he's most interested in, and about how the practices inflicted on them have continued in other forms down to the present. [4]

The most problematic aspect of Monnier's book, though, has more to do with literary than historical judgment. Historians sometimes sniff at non-academic historical forms—historical novels, films and TV—for departing from documentable fact and relying on imagination, as though good history doesn't also need to be animated by imagination. The problem here isn't that Monnier uses his imagination, but *how* he uses it.

At times, as he lingers at the camp, Monnier imagines himself into the minds of people who passed through it in the 1940s. Sometimes this pays off, as in chapter 4, where he summons up those who worked in the camp for the authorities or relief agencies. Among the camp guards he imagines an everyman named Georges, Roger, or Jean, himself arrived with the enormous exodus of French citizens fleeing the German advance in summer 1940, and living hand-to-mouth in the "so-called free zone" (41). For him, a job at the camp offers food, accommodation, and security. He's not cruel or extortionate like his plump, avaricious colleagues and superiors, but he doesn't dare lift a hand to help. French nationality alone makes him less precarious than the internees. Another could-be-anyone is worse: "Martial, or René" (42), a local boy and a good-for-nothing. With a kick here, a thwack of the rifle-butt there, he relishes the experience of being respected and feared for the first time in his life. But most of all he relishes the opportunity to help himself to the internees' rations and steal from the relief parcels they receive: systematic robbery that the management of the camp

accepts tacitly or profits from directly. Thinking his way into the minds of these men allows Monnier to render the moral complexity of the times, though he evidently finds it harder to understand the inmates' responses to them. "There are no rebels. Why? Why only suicides, and no attempted murders?" (45)



If Jean or René represent the inhumanity of the camp, humanity is represented by women workers from Protestant or Jewish humanitarian agencies, French, Swiss or American.

Monnier imagines their names: Maureen, Friedel, Marisa or Laure. Young and inexperienced or older and wiser, all are determined. "They all struggle fiercely, brace themselves against the misery that guards and administrators seem not to see." (49) A finely judged paragraph teases out the camp administration's attitude to these women—suspicion, then an exploitative toleration. Their humanitarian work allows the administration to limit the risk of rebellion or mass death among the inmates, and present a rosier picture of conditions in the camp to the outside world, at no cost. "There's a strange cooperation from which each side draws an advantage, humanitarian for one and statistical for the other." (50) But there's

something simplistic in this gendered dramatization of men as agents of inhumanity in the camp (whether as perpetrators or bystanders) and women as carers and nurturers, *reactive* rather than active subjects.



What of the camp's Jewish inmates? Perhaps it's unsurprising that Monnier struggles to depict them as more than passive victims, having earlier identified them as "no longer actors of History." Sometimes he contents himself with lists of names: "the Suesses, Zimmermanns, and Kohns" (17), "the Zinis, Guttmanns, Sekulas" (20). When he tries to do more than this, his imagination is limited, for example when he names specific inmates picked from a group brought to Rivesaltes on 24 Aug 1942 during the great round-up of Jews in the 'free' zone:

The Sterns and their daughter with her long brown plaits—she'll be 16 next year, a critical age that tips you into adulthood and deprives you of the help of charitable organizations. There's Mme Roos, packed into a corner, her husband has escaped, she seems frightened, she's never been alone in her life. The Trumanns with their three children. The elderly Meyers, husband and wife, mistreated, eyes empty. Silbermann and Breyer [...]

These brief and presumably fictionalized sketches aren't ineffective, though they do beg a question about sources. But they're clichéd, leaving their subjects as one-dimensional victims, and markedly less nuanced than the reflection on the camp authorities' actions a few pages later.

More troublingly, Monnier's imaginative recreation of Jews' experiences at Rivesaltes is marred by a persistent sexism. Early on, he imagines new arrivals at the camp "standing, suitcases at their feet... alone, or with their wives, or worse with their whole family, despairing that they've been unable to protect them" (16): Jewish victimhood is encapsulated through the wounded masculinity of a man no longer able to protect his family. A little later he imagines a little girl in the camp, wise enough that she no longer asks questions that her parents can't answer. But what about her mother? "She was pretty. Perhaps a guard noticed her. Perhaps he dragged her behind the last hut to satisfy himself in exchange for a meagre advantage for her daughter?" (26) Here, though he doesn't seem to realize it, rather than imagining the camp from the woman's perspective, Monnier imagines *her* from the same perspective as her abuser.

The crux of the book is chapter 6, in which Monnier imagines the departure of one of the trains that carried Jews from Rivesaltes to Drancy, en route to Auschwitz. It's also the

passage that made me most queasy. At the end of the previous chapter, Monnier is in section (*îlot*) K of the camp, looking for the remains of the railway. But now he brings the past into the present tense, and places himself among the deportees as they—“we”—advance towards the railway. He hasn’t really earned the right to do this, after imagining them so thinly. And here again, the gendered limits of his imagination are all too evident. Monnier conjures the deportees’ anguish by homing in on three men among them. The first holds the hand of a young woman, remembering nights in her arms, how desirable she was, and regretting that instead of trips to London and New York on “the finest trains, the most prestigious liners,” (71) they’re now boarding a cattle truck at Rivesaltes: this erotic reverie is how Monnier evokes the past and future that were stolen from the murdered Jews of Europe. A couple disagree over whether they were right to entrust their children to a Protestant charity the day before: despite the mother’s sudden doubts, the man, more sensible, knows that the decision is irrevocable. And at the last, as “we” stand before the gaping doors of a line of wagons, a nagging wife tells her husband that they should have fled earlier, that he should have listened to her, that if she hadn’t gone to see the nurse from CIMADE their little girl would be getting on the train with them—

Poor bloke, hen-pecked on his way to the death camps.

*

This book, you’ll have gathered, put my back up. Reading it a second time, I found more to admire, but my queasiness at its problematic aspects only deepened. A literary sensibility, a psychogeographer’s attention to the detail of space and place, can illuminate the history of

a site like Rivesaltes in all sorts of ways, and at times Monnier achieves that. But his moral outrage at the treatment of the Jews at Rivesaltes rings false, because he is much more convincing, much more able to communicate a full humanity and moral complexity, when he adopts the perspective of the perpetrator than when he adopts that of the victim. And his effort to understand the camp by imagining himself into the minds of those who lived and worked there falls short, in the end, because his imagination is more limited than he knows.

Alain Monnier, *Rivesaltes, un camp en France* (Flaujac-Poujols, La Louve éditions, 2008)

NOTES

[1] Friedel Bohny-Reiter, *Journal de Rivesaltes 1941–1942* (Geneva, 1993), entries for 10 and 13 Jan 1942.

[2] John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, 2000).

[3] Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', reproduced in *The Jewish Writings* (New York, 2007), pp. 264–274, quotation from p.265. Arendt's story, like many others, reminds us that Jews did not cease to be "actors of History" at even the worst moments.

[4] The Rivesaltes memorial museum, very good on the continuity of illiberal state practices through the mid-twentieth century, is quieter on their manifestations in the present: a point sharply made by Leopold Lambert in his blog post "Architects Accomplices of a Selective

National(ist) Narrative of Memorialization – Rivesaltes, France,” *The Funambulist*, 8 March 2017: <https://thefunambulist.net/architectural-projects/architects-accomplices-selective-nationalist-narrative-memorialization-rivesaltes-france> (accessed 1 Sept 2020)